

Policy Brief:
Iraq War Troop Surge
March 2, 2009

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- Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid, in a 1/5/2007 letter to President Bush

"The situation in Iraq has improved. Violence has been reduced substantially from the horrific sectarian killing of 2006 and 2007. Al Qaeda in Iraq has been dealt a serious blow by our troops and Iraq's Security Forces, and through our partnership with Sunni Arabs. The capacity of Iraq's Security Forces has improved, and Iraq's leaders have taken steps toward political accommodation. The relative peace and strong participation in January's provincial elections sent a powerful message to the world about how far Iraqis have come in pursuing their aspirations through a peaceful political process."

- President Barack Obama, at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, on 2/27/09

SUMMARY

Capitalizing on the gains of the Iraq war troop surge that achieved stability in Iraq, on February 27, 2009, President Obama announced the removal of all U.S. combat brigades from Iraq by August 2010, or within 18 months, while leaving up to 50,000 troops for a transitional force until the end of 2011.

The President's troop withdrawal plan is consistent with the Status of Forces Agreement, reached by the U.S. and Iraq in late 2008. The agreement, which went into effect on January 1, 2009, states that U.S. combat forces will withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, and that all U.S. forces will be completely out of Iraq by December 31, 2011. This pact, however, is subject to possible negotiations that could delay U.S. troop withdrawals based on conditions on the ground, and to that effect, President Obama has assured Congressional leaders that he would "revisit his plan if the situation on the ground deteriorates and violence increases."

Although greatly improved security in the country is allowing U.S. troops to come home, according to commanders, much work remains to be done in order that gains do not unravel. This brief seeks to summarize the Iraq troop surge, its success in stabilizing the country, and address several common critiques of the surge which have recently been raised by the media and Democrats in Congress.

BACKGROUND

On January 10, 2007, with increasingly high levels of sectarian violence and public support for the Iraq war dropping, President Bush announced a major course-correction in the strategy of the war. The so-called "Iraq surge" deployed an additional five Army brigades (20,000 soldiers) and extended the tours of 4,000 Marines', as well as a fundamentally embraced a counterinsurgency doctrine.

The goal was now to secure the Iraqi population from systemic violence so that civic and political progress could be achieved. As Gen. David Petraeus stated in his guidance to the troops, "The Iraqi people are the decisive 'terrain.' Together with our Iraqi partners, work to provide the people security, to give them respect to gain their support, and to facilitate establishment of local governance, restoration of basic services, and revival of local economies."

In addition, the troop surge afforded the U.S. military an opportunity, in partnership with Iraqi forces, to launch three large-scale operations in 2007, which are described below in further detail. The first operation sent additional troops into Baghdad to pacify the capital. The second phase aggressively cleared al Qaeda sanctuaries throughout the country. The final operation pursued terrorist operatives as they fled their sanctuaries and tried to regroup in rural secondary areas in Iraq.



(Photo credit: John Moore)

1) Baghdad Security Plan

- The U.S. sent *two* of the five new surge brigades into Baghdad. American and Iraqi forces in the capital took up a new posture—patrolling neighborhoods by placing local outposts or "Joint Security Stations" in them. As Petraeus put it in his guidelines, "You can't commute to this fight... Living among the people is essential to securing them and defeating the insurgents." These smaller outposts spread throughout Baghdad enabled U.S. troops to develop relationships and earn the trust of local residents. Coalition forces were able to establish safe markets and neighborhoods. As the population of Baghdad became more secure, the terrorists were increasingly isolated and violence in the city dropped off precipitously.

2) Operation Phantom Thunder

- The remaining *three* surge brigades were positioned along the "belts" of Baghdad. These belts are the network of roads, rivers, and other communications lines within 30 miles of the capital city. Al Qaeda used these lines to supply Baghdad and sustain its vehicle bombing campaign.
- Beginning in June 2007, Operation Phantom Thunder was comprised of several simultaneous military strikes in these belt areas around Baghdad, preventing the insurgents from moving between safe havens with immunity.
- Phantom Thunder killed 1,100 enemy fighters and detained over 6,700. The offensive drove remaining al Qaeda from populated areas, into rural regions where they were more exposed and vulnerable.
- As General Joseph Fil explained, "As we have gone through the city and concentrated in a lot of areas where [the enemy] had free rein sometime before, those areas are now denied to them. And so their freedom of maneuver inside of the city...has been more and more restricted, and their support zones have been severely restricted, both inside the city and also in the belts around the city."

3) Operation Phantom Strike

- In August 2007, Operation Phantom Strike was launched; this operation focused on quick strikes against terrorist staging areas and preventing insurgents from setting up new sanctuaries.
- For example, the coalition forces cleared 50 villages in the Diyala River valley which were occupied by al Qaeda in April of that year. Al Qaeda was thus unable to use the valley region as a refuge from the nearby Hamrin Ridge.
- Similar successes occurred in Tarmiya, Nineweh, Tamim, and Salah-ad-Din.

The surge allowed the U.S. to eliminate extremist safe havens and sanctuaries and to maintain our gains. In addition, the Iraqi security forces continued to improve its capabilities. Lastly, the Iraqi people clearly rejected al Qaeda and other extremists, which fueled bottom-up “awakening” movements by both Sunni and Shia groups who wanted a chance to reconcile with the government of Iraq.

SURGE RESULTS

Violence:

- Attacks have declined from a high of 180 per day in June 2007 to approximately 25 per day recently.
- Deaths from ethno-sectarian violence have dropped over 90 percent since June 2007.
- Events involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have decreased by more than 70 percent.
- Coalition forces found 85 percent more weapons caches in early 2008 than during the same timeframe in 2007.
- 822 U.S. troops were killed in 2006 in pre-surge Iraq, whereas in 2008 U.S. casualties decreased to 314.

Political Progress:

- In late 2008, the Iraqi government approved the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement. This agreement says that U.S. combat forces will withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, and that all U.S. forces will be completely out of Iraq by December 31, 2011. This pact, however, is subject to possible negotiations which could delay U.S. troop withdrawals based on situations on the ground.
- On January 31, 2009, Iraq held provincial elections across the country. These elections, the first elections in Iraq since 2005, were remarkably peaceful and 7.5 million Iraqis, about 51 percent of eligible voters, took part. This turnout rate is comparable to American turnout in a Presidential election.
- Iraqi military and police forces were entirely responsible for the security of polling locations on Election Day. This was the first time U.S. troop presence was not increased prior to an Iraqi election.
- The United Nations special envoy immediately certified the legitimacy of the elections. According to final results, Sunni and Shiite secular parties fared better than their religious counterparts. Furthermore, supporters of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Dawa party appear to have gained in the capital, Baghdad, and in southern Iraq, the country's Shiite heartland. For example, Maliki and his allies won pluralities of the vote in Baghdad, Basra, and several other provinces.
- These results provide evidence that many Iraqis increasingly view themselves as one nation and not as separate religious and ethnic groups.

Steady Economic Growth:

- Iraq's estimated 2008 GDP is \$84 billion and the country has a real growth rate of 6.6%. The United States is Iraq's third largest import partner.
- General Petraeus projected Iraq will spend around \$11 billion on security in 2009, allowing the U.S. military to reduce its funds request for Iraqi troops from \$5.1 billion to \$2.8 billion.
- Iraq has purchased over \$2 billion of American equipment and services. Iraq also will purchase 40 commercial aircraft from the U.S. at a cost of approximately \$5 billion.

American Global Standing:

- As Ambassador Ryan Crocker noted on the impact of President Bush's troop surge decision, "In the teeth of ferociously negative popular opinion, in the face of a lot of well-reasoned advice to the contrary, he said he was going forward, not backward," clearly demonstrating to the global community and potential adversaries that the United States is willing to fulfill its overseas commitments.
- The troop surge importantly challenged an opinion held by some U.S. adversaries that American civilian leadership would not have the stomach to finish the fight.

Troop Posture:

- On September 15, 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted a "mission transition" underway in Iraq for coalition forces, shifting from the surge strategy to an "over watch" strategy. This new posture stresses providing emergency support as needed, allowing the Iraqi military and police to take the lead in security and stability operations. American troops are now focused on advising and training the Iraqis.
- Iraqi Security Forces now have the security lead in 11 of Iraq's 18 provinces and total more than 531,000 personnel.
- There are currently about 142,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. The peak level of U.S. troops in Iraq—250,000—came early in the war during major combat operations.

DEMOCRATIC OBSTRUCTIONISM

Under the leadership of Generals Petraeus and Odierno, the surge has succeeded, despite vocal criticism and legislative obstruction by Congressional Democrats. In 2007, House Democrats repeatedly sought to cut off funding for the troops and micro-manage the commanders on the ground.

Legislative Attempts:

- One day before President Bush announced the surge, Rep. Martin Meehan (D-MA), along with **15** Democrat co-sponsors introduced H.Res. 41, "Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that an increase in number of members of the United States Forces deployed in Iraq is the wrong course of action and that a drastic shift in the political and diplomatic strategy of the United States is needed to help secure and stabilize Iraq."
- On January 10, 2007, the same day President Bush announced the troop surge, Rep. Kucinich (D-OH) and **21** Democratic co-sponsors introduced H.Con.Res. 23, "Expressing the sense of Congress that the President should not order an escalation in the total number of members of the United States Armed Forces serving in Iraq."
- A little over a month after the troop surge was *announced*, on February 16, 2007, the Democrat majority in the House *passed* H.Con.Res. 63 by a vote of 246-182, "Disapproving of the decision of the President announced on January 10, 2007, to deploy more than 20,000 additional United States combat troops to Iraq."
- On April 25, 2007, the House *passed* an emergency troop funding supplemental conference report by a vote of 218-208. The conference report included an accelerated timetable for troop withdrawal as well as funding and tactical restrictions on military commanders.
- On November 14, 2007, the House *passed* H.R. 4156 by a vote of 218-208. This bill sought to require U.S. troop withdrawals begin within 30 days of enactment, with the goal of completing withdrawal by December 15, 2008. Senate Republicans blocked this bill from reaching the President's desk.

Democrat Rhetoric:

- "Surging forces is a strategy that you have already tried and that has already failed... we believe that trying again would be a serious mistake... Adding more combat troops will only endanger more Americans and stretch our military to the breaking point for no strategic gain. And it would

undermine our efforts to get the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own future. We are well past the point of more troops for Iraq."

- *Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid, 1/5/2007 letter to President Bush*

- "There is little doubt that our Iraq policy is not succeeding...This troop escalation does not represent a new strategy...It is obvious that there is not a military solution to the violence in Iraq." – *Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD), 2/14/2007*
- "More troops doing more of the same is not a policy, it is not a strategy, it is not a tactic, it is the status quo plus." – *Former Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-IL), 2/16/2007*
- "This escalation of the war is the same failed strategy, all it will do is put more and more of our young men and women in harm's way." – *Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY), 2/16/2007*
- "What we have now in Iraq is a defeat... The President proposes an escalation of a failed policy." – *Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), 2/16/2007*
- "Forget the question of an additional surge...We should redeploy." – *Rep. Chaka Fattah (D-PA), 2/16/2007*
- "The escalation of troop levels makes no strategic sense... The administration's policy is like a conjuring trick of denial, delusion and determined folly, which will only deepen the disaster." – *Rep. Diana DeGette (D-CO), 2/16/2007*

RESPONDING TO THE CRITICS

Q: Do our commanders think the surge succeeded?

A: Yes. The first major assessment of the surge was testimony of General Petraeus on September 10 and 11, 2007. Petraeus stated, "As a bottom line up front, the military objectives of the surge are, in large measure, being met." Later, on April 8-9, 2008, General Petraeus reported more progress and recommended a reduction of U.S. forces by July 2008, to about 145,000, slightly higher than pre-surge levels. In late August 2008, Gen. Petraeus recommended a drawdown of an additional 8,000 forces by February 2009; Gen. Petraeus later amended the recommendation to remove the 8,000 forces by the end of 2008. Those American forces have since departed Iraq.

Q: Has the surge failed politically, even if it has succeeded militarily?

A: No. On the contrary, the tactical and strategic military success of the surge has complemented the democratization of Iraq. It has provided time for the political process to work. The peaceful election on January 31, 2009, is no small political accomplishment and is due in no small part to the security provided by the surge.

Q: Are the Iraqis using the ballot box to become more sectarian?

A: No. Contrary to claims that Iraqis would use democracy to splinter the country along sectarian lines, recent elections prove otherwise. In the January 2009 provincial elections, Iraqis shifted the balance of political power from sectarian parties to more secular ones, like the Prime Minister's Dawa party. These elections showed that Iraqis increasingly view themselves as one nation, not separate religious/ethnic groups. The elections were a victory for the idea of a unified, democratic Iraq.

Q: Without high levels of U.S. troops, will Iraq just return to violence or dictatorship, or an Iranian satellite?

A: No. Iraq is a nation rich in resources—both natural and human. Iraqis have a stake in the cooperative development of these assets. Oil provides Iraq with a fundamental economic base.

Furthermore, if security gains are maintained, it is probable that Iraq's sizeable elite and middle class abroad will return and thrive. These people will provide the country with invaluable professional human resources and talent to diversify the Iraqi economy. Finally, Iraqi Shia and Sunnis share a longstanding identity as Arabs and growing identities as Iraqis. It is plausible that as Americans leave the country, Iraqis will likewise rebuff Persian overtures from Iran.

Q: Will U.S. troops be in harm's way as far out as 2015?

A: No, according to the Status of Forces Agreement, all U.S. troops must be out of Iraq by the end of 2011, unless Iraq agrees to extend that time frame (which the Prime Minister has indicated he will not do). While many recognize the need for a "residual force" for some time after 2011, there would be far fewer American troops in Iraq and they would be performing less hazardous jobs, as Iraqi troops continue to assume primary combat roles.

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